

Dog has its day in P.D.Q. Bach's series of spoofs

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CONCERT

THE 'OTHER' BACH

Yong Siew Toh Conservatory
Conservatory Concert Hall
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For the unlucky 13th edition of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory's Bach Cantata Series, the focus was on P.D.Q. Bach, the youngest, least and oddest of Johann Sebastian Bach's 20-odd children.

That was the nom de plume of American composer and parodist Peter Schickele (1935-2024), the fictional Professor of Musical Pathology at the University of Southern North Dakota.

The persona of the errant Bach offspring was played by a be-wigged Alan Bennett, head of voice studies, who in German-accented English introduced nine works of chamber and vocal music, a primer of his irreverent and anarchic sense of musical humour.

Unlike other great musical humorists, Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Mozart or Dmitri Shostakovich, a little P.D.Q. goes a long, long way. More than 2½ hours of slapstick schtick could drag and grate on the senses, but the full-house audience, with many children in attendance, lapped it all up.

Even the titles carried a naughty glint in the eye, such as Sonata Innamorata for piano four hands, with three movements spoofing Ludwig van Beethoven and updated to embrace the LGBTQ+ movement.

Imagine, also, the fun bringing together four members of the orchestra's most comical instrument – the bassoon – for a Prelude and Fugue punningly titled Lip My Reeds.

There was a Hindemithian logic to *The Only Piece Ever Written For Violin And Tuba*, with four movements pranking old J.S. Bach's Air



(From left) Kira Lim, Park Minjun, Kim Oh-yeon and Stephanie Joshvin performing *The Stoned Guest* with golden retriever Cobi. PHOTO: NEO JIE NING

On G String and the modern phenomenon of social media influencers.

As hoary viola jokes go: "How many violists does it take to play the viola?" The answer in *Sonata For Viola Four Hands And Harpsichord* was two, occasionally three.

The Short-Tempered Clavier – in all major and minor keys except the really hard ones – had preludes and fugues based on popular tunes like *Chopsticks*, *Mary Had A Little Lamb* and *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, alongside more serious ones by Beethoven, George Handel and Johannes Brahms.

Then came the vocal stuff. *Four Folksong Upsettings* – for mezzanine-soprano, devious instruments and piano – had in its third and fourth songs, *He Came From Over Yonder Ridge* and *The Farmer On The Dole*, an uncanny prescience about the looming 47th presidency of the United States.

Few items could, however, trump the actual cantatas in the concert's second half, accompanied by the

YST Orchestral Institute led by Lien Boon Hua, with stage direction by Edith Podesta.

Students of *The Opera Workshop* sang in German for the *Cantata Blaues Gras* (Bluegrass Cantata) accompanied by a blue grass band of electones simulating banjos and bass.

The Stoned Guest, a half-act opera sung in English, included all the operatic tropes played to death in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Georges Bizet's *Carmen*. Everyone on stage got to sing themselves to death, but returned to a happy ending, *deus ex machina*, of course.

Hands up all those who came just to watch the *Canine Cantata: Wacht, Arf!* (*Sleeping Dogs Awake!*). That a golden retriever named Cobi (trained by Albertius Tiudentius, normally better known for Bach pedagogy), which got a few lines voiced by countertenor Park Minjun, completely stole the show said it all.

In these troubled times, laughter is the best medicine.