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Stunning showcase of Yong Siew Toh Conservatory's cello talent

Cellissimo at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory showcased the talents of current and former students. PHOTO: KWAI MING YANG LUCAS

Chang Tou Liang

CONCERT
CELLISSIMO
Yong Siew Toh Conservatory Cello Ensemble
Conservatory Concert Hall
March 27

If one wonders why there are so many highly accomplished young cellists plying their trade in Singapore's concert scene today, look no further than the cello studio of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory, helmed by Australian-Chinese cellist Qin Li-Wei.

Cellissimo, now in its 20th edition, is the annual showcase for his students. This evening, 12 present students were joined by three alumni – Wu Daidai, Wang Zihao and Christopher Mui – who are members of professional orchestras today.

Rather than highlighting solo virtuosity, this concert was about playing together. And there can be no sight more awe-inspiring than 13 spiffily attired cellists opening the concert with German cellist-composer Julius Klengel's Hymnus scored for 12 cellos. Just listen to its individual parts coalesce into a resonantly beautiful whole, a case of "united we stand, divided we fall".

Its prayerful countenance then gave way to the pomp and ceremony of the Grand March from Giuseppe Verdi's opera Aida in a truncated but effective arrangement. Then the stage cleared to leave just two cellists, Zhu Zeyu and Liu Yubin, for two movements from Luigi Boccherini's Cello Sonata In A Major, in which the focus was on the intimacy of two voices.

Two became four when they were joined by Chang Jia-yun and Wang Jiaye, who served as accompaniment for a lovely arrangement of Claudio Monteverdi's Pur Ti Miro, the final touching duet from his opera The Coronation Of Poppaea.

The foursome stayed on for the Concert Waltz by Wilhelm Fitzenhagen, the German cellist for whom Pyotr Tchaikovsky composed his famous Rococo Variations. The elegant opulence of aristocratic ballroom scenes from the opera Eugene Onegin were lovingly relived.

Chang and Wang then became the soloists in contemporary Sicilian cellist-composer Giovanni Sollima's Violoncelles, Vibrez!.

Like a modern-day concerto grosso, the duo was backed by six other cellists for a quasi-minimalist post-Romantic romp. Closing with an upward glissando and a theatrical circular sweep of the bows, this exuberant show lived up to Sollima's teacher Antonio Janigro's exhortation of: "Cellos, vibrate!"

It would be almost remiss of chamber concerts these days to omit tangos of the Argentine Astor Piazzolla. Here, his Libertango and Fuga Y Misterio had heady airings from Chen Pei-yi, Chen Youjia, Liu You-yu and Cao Huiying, who revelled in the vibrant rhythms and skilful counterpoint.

Georg Goltermann's brief but pleasant Serenade For Four Cellos then made way for James Barralet's Four Folk Songs for eight cellos, which transcribed melodies from India, Hungary and Russia in a respectful and convincing manner. The cellists truly let their hair down in this very enjoyable outing.

It seemed a pity the two-hour concert had to end, but the full complement of the baker's dozen returned with two generous but contrasting encores. Gabriel Faure's Cantique De Jean Racine, originally written for choir, highlighted the pure lyricism of string voices, while Sollima's widely striding Marcia was a vigorous send-off for the audience on an upbeat note.

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