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Rocky start, big finish for engaging rendition of Ravel

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CONCERT
THE COMPLETE CHAMBER MUSIC OF MAURICE RAVEL (PART I)
Yong Siew Toh Conservatory Conservatory Concert Hall
Sept 30

The year 2025 marks the 150th anniversary of the birth of French composer Maurice Ravel (1875 to 1937).

Renowned for his orchestral works Bolero, La Valse and ballet Daphnis And Chloe, he also wrote a small body of chamber music.

All these were performed by faculty, students and alumni of the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory over two concerts.

The first evening opened eventfully with his Sonata For Violin & Cello (1920 to 1922), performed by violinist Qian Zhou and cellist Wang Zihao. Stage lights had not been switched on and the duo played under dim lighting for much of the first movement.

Vigorous pizzicatos and bowings in the second movement led to a dislocation of one of Qian's strings. An abrupt pause and a quick retuning put the music back on track. The pair made the most of the music's quirky charm, and its use of pentatonics drawn from folk music and jazz, for a compelling reading.

A rarity was Three Poems Of Stephane Mallarme (1914), sung by mezzo-soprano Priscilla Fong, alongside two flutes (Eric Lamb and Cheryl Lim), two clarinets (Ma Yue and Yang Jin Liang), string quartet (T'ang Quartet) and piano (Lim Yan).

Symbolist poet Mallarme is well known for L'Apres-midi d'un faune (Afternoon Of The Fawn), famously set by Claude Debussy in his orchestral Prelude. Fong's French diction and phrasing were excellent, while the Impressionist hues conjured by the instruments were dreamily vivid.

Not so rare is Ravel's Tzigane, his popular gypsy rhapsody from 1924. Violinist Zuo Jun's extended opening solo was arresting in delivery and pianist Liu Jia's scintillating solo part simulated the rapid repeated notes of a Hungarian cimbalom (dulcimer). Together, they romped home in a blaze of fireworks.

Following the intermission was the evening's guilty pleasure, the Introduction et Allegro (1905) scored for harp, flute (Evgueni Brokmiller), clarinet (Ma) and string quartet (T'ang Quartet). Harpist Vanessa Irwanto was the star in this lushly scored work, which began on a gentle note but, following a cadenza, morphed into an elegant dance of true Gallic charm.

The concert's longest work was the Piano Trio In A Minor (1914), one of the 20th century's most important trios.

The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory's faculty, students and alumni performing Maurice Ravel's complete chamber works. PHOTO: LUCAS KWAI MING YANG

Singapore's "Million Dollar Trio" of violinist Qian, cellist Qin Li-Wei and pianist Albert Tiu brought out a nuanced, enthralling performance clear in its delineation of themes. The opening was taken at a moderate tempo, its lilting main theme later appearing in various guises in all the other movements.

The animated second movement, Pantoum, took its name and form from a Malay pantun, while the slow Passacaille brooded over a steadfast ground bass built on Tiu's piano. Even if one did not catch the cyclical form at first listen, the Finale provided a glorious homecoming for the said theme, closing on an invigorating and spirited high.

Do not miss Part II of Ravel's complete chamber works – including his violin sonatas and string quartet – on Oct 8.

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