

Freshness and vigour meet range and ambition in music line-up

Geoffrey Lim

CONCERT

**YST ORCHESTRAL INSTITUTE PLAYS
SHOSTAKOVICH, HAYDN & PART**

Yong Siew Toh Orchestral Institute
Esplanade Concert Hall
April 11

The Yong Siew Toh Conservatory is one of the finest institutions of its kind in Asia and its graduates comprise some of the most talented young musicians anywhere in the world.

It really deserves to be better known among the Singaporean public, and concerts such as Saturday's, with Jason Lai conducting the YST Orchestral Institute in an excellent programme of range and ambition, may go some way towards addressing this.

One could be forgiven for welcoming yet another Dmitri Shostakovich symphony with less than unalloyed joy given its seeming ubiquity on concert programmes in 2026, but Lai and the orchestra's performance of the Fifth had a vigour and freshness that dispelled any reservations.

Tricky sections, such as the moment in the first movement's development where the dotted note motif is tossed between the highest registers of the winds and strings in increasing frenzy before the largamente unison climax, were played with an impressive combination of dexterity and power. There was also a delightfully delirious violin solo from concertmaster Chen Shu-Yu in the second movement.

Perhaps Lai and the orchestra could have done with a touch more bitterness in the sinister second movement. It was superbly executed, but sounded a little genial for this reviewer's taste – like an Americano when Shosta-



The Yong Siew Toh Orchestral Institute played a programme of Dmitri Shostakovich, Joseph Haydn and Arvo Part on April 11. PHOTO: JELLAL KOAY

kovich wanted a Negroni.

But the third movement was devastatingly shaped and chilling in its impact, with some magnificent playing from the strings and winds.

The triumphalist finale was taken at a less manic pace than usual and laced with just the right dose of bombast.

Lai and the orchestra – backed by superb brass and electrifying percussion – skilfully captured the hoarse grandiosity of the D major peroration, those repeated high unison As perfectly recalling Russian soprano and Shostakovich collaborator Galina Vishnevskaya's memorable description of them as “nails pounded into one's brain”.

What a contrast to the programme-opening “Military” Symphony by Joseph Haydn, a dashing inventive work as untroubled as the Shostakovich is neurotic.

Although it was written during the wars of the first coalition (and premiered in the capital of one of the war's main belligerents), its only nods to its martial nickname are the Janissary-inspired eruptions that bedevil the otherwise placid allegretto and the vivacious finale.

It received a similarly enthusiastic and accomplished performance, with flutes and oboes marvellously svelte in the Allegro's lilting main theme and strings graceful throughout. Percussion and trumpets were suitably fiery in the bellicose Turkish outbursts, and the minuet had a patrician if somewhat decorous elegance.

There were a few minor miscalculations of balance and just a smidge of rhythmic imprecision in certain trickier spots, but these took nothing from an assured and often thrilling performance.

Although it was programmed as a palate-cleansing intermezzo before the ferocious pomp of the Shostakovich, Estonian composer Arvo Part's meditative, minimalist *Fratres* provided the most unexpectedly transfixing performance of the evening. With its three plaintive voices suspended above an eerie bass drone in open fifths, it received a luminous, concentrated reading of great sensitivity, particularly in the vanishing quietude of the strings' concluding phrases.

One can hardly wait to hear what these musicians are capable of when they are no longer students.