

Jazz, pop spice up piano festival under Albert Tiu's direction

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CONCERTS
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Victoria Concert Hall/The Arts House
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Piano recitals are a dime a dozen these days, showcasing a bewildering choice of international and local artists. The Singapore International Piano Festival, now in its 32nd edition, remains the nation's marquee event, distinguished by unity yet diversity, and strong artist- and repertoire-based curation.

With fifth artistic director Albert Tiu (head of piano studies at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music) at the helm, the festival has made changes. There were six recitals for the first time, with the uncommon theme of concert pianist as composer, transcriber and improviser.

American pianist Conrad Tao last appeared here as a teenage prodigy at the 2009 Singapore Sun Festival. His recital *Emigres And Friends* on July 2 comprised 15 short works reflecting his homeland as a melting pot of cultures, with jazz, popular music and atonality finding healthy parity.

George Gershwin's songs (*The Man I Love*, *Clap Yo' Hands*, *I Got Rhythm*) were performed alongside Arnold Schoenberg's dodecaphonic miniatures and variations from Sergei Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody On A Theme Of Paganini*. With Maurice Ravel's *Sonatine* sandwiching Billy Strayhorn's *Chelsea Bridge*, something special and liberating was taking place.

As Tao fired on all cylinders in Gershwin's *Rhapsody In Blue*,

using his forearms to crash through its cadenza, one could be forgiven for imagining a full jazz band backing him to the hilt.

British pianist Hyung-ki Joo is the keyboard half of the musical comedy duo Igudesman & Joo. *Dreams And Nightmares* on July 3 featured an exploration of childhood, with pieces Lina's Waltz and Lullaby For Leo written for his children. Their simplicity and innocence were complemented by seven delightful pieces from Childhood, reliving his early years quite like Robert Schumann's reflections in *Kinderszenen*.

The improvisatory segment saw jazzy asides to Claude Debussy's *The Little Shepherd* and Golliwogg's *Cakewalk* from Children's Corner suite, as conceived by Gwilym Simcock, and Leszek Mozdzierz's anarchic treatment of Frederic Chopin shorts. Whiplash-inducing accounts of the Scarbo from Ravel's *Gaspard De La Nuit* and *La Valse* closed each half in a state of intoxication.

His encores were a throwback to Igudesman & Joo schtick, with singing, whistling and plucking piano strings to Johann Sebastian Bach's *Air On The G String*, and getting director Tiu and Canadian pianist Jon Kimura Parker to participate in his foot-stomping *Funk Yeah!*

Sean Chen of the US was bronze medallist at the 2013 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition. In *Music And Magic* on July 5 in the afternoon, the world premiere of his exuberant *Daydream No. 2: Flight* was kinetically charged, combining jazz harmonies and rhythms with late Romantic influences. The crispness of phrasing in Jean-Philippe Rameau's pieces, in original baroque writing and as



(Clockwise from left) Conrad Tao, Jonathan Shin and Churen Li were among six pianists who gave recitals at the Singapore International Piano Festival. PHOTOS: NATHANIEL LIM, YORICKO LIU

transcribed by Leopold Godowsky, was a pleasure to hear.

His own transcription of Paul Dukas' *Sorcerer's Apprentice* was so convincingly Lisztian as to simulate a one-man orchestra. Preceding that with Gyorgy Ligeti's pointillistic *Der Zaubерlehrling* was a touch of genius. His traversal of the entire Italian book of Franz Liszt's *Years Of Pilgrimage* – seven works in all – was breathtaking, uniting the lyricism of Three Petrarch Sonnets with hellfire barnstorming in the Dante Sonata.

Parker of Canada, winner of the 1984 Leeds International Piano Competition, last performed here in the late 1980s with the Singapore and Toronto symphony orchestras. *Structure And Spontaneity* on July 5 evening opened with sonatas by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (K. 311) and Ludwig van Beethoven (*Appassionata*).

By improvising passages leading into Mozart, he relived the lost art of preluding. With added ornaments, he also made one listen to old works anew.

Even more freedom was displayed in the second half, which included Ravel's impressionistic *Jeux D'Eau*, Chinese-Canadian composer Alexina Louie's *Memories In An Ancient Garden* – evoking a hazy, opium-induced trance – and the minimalist musings of John Adams' *China Gates*.

For their faith, the entranced audience also received doses of Chick Corea (*Got A Match?*) and Oscar Peterson (*Blues Etude*) and, to bring down the house, his riotous take on Elton John's *Bennie And*

The Jets.

Two Singaporean pianists performed one-hour, late-night recitals at the Play Den of The Arts House.

Churen Li's recital *Echoes And Refractions* on July 2 could be described as a dream. Opening with Debussy's *Clair De Lune*, the theme of night featured motifs and fragments recurring like an *idée fixe*.

Original compositions were improvised from melodies by Schumann, Mozart and others, using altered harmonies and later going off tangent to nether reaches. *Good Night*, after Leos Janacek's *On An Overgrown Path*, was hauntingly beautiful, while *Dream Of The Panthere* boldly quoted from Rachmaninoff's Second Sonata. By the final piece *Burning Moon*, *Clair De Lune* had been transformed into the glorious light of day.

Restless Natures exactly describes Jonathan Shin, whose recital on July 3 matched Parker's for sheer eclecticism. His *Night Incantation* provided an illusion of a smoky nightclub, followed by Mozart's quasi-improvisatory *Fantasy In D Minor* (K. 397), notoriously unfinished, but duly completed by Shin.

The House Sings involved the audience, from choosing a theme (*Promenade* from Modest Musorgsky's *Pictures At An Exhibition*) to recorded segments being aired from their handphones.

Cervantes' *Dreams Recurring Dreams Of Consumerism* was a fantasy on what the Spaniard might have thought of the Japanese naming a discount store after his literary anti-hero. Works by Lili Boulanger, Bobby Ge, Nico Muhly, Takashi Yoshimatsu and Timo Andres were thrown into the mix before closing with Nathaniel Parks' *From A Great Distance*, mixing electronics and recorded voice fragments to recount the Covid-19 pandemic.

The refreshing changes taken by this festival under Tiu's inspired direction constituted a brave new world. More is needed and vive la difference.

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