

Concert review: Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra earns its standing ovation

By Mervin Beng

Singapore was privileged to be one of the six destinations for The Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra's world tour, under the baton of Eiji Oue. The tour commemorates the 100th year of the orchestra, albeit delayed by a few years owing to the devastating tsunami in 2011, .

Fittingly, the concert began with Toshiro Mayuzumi's Bugaku, ballet music in two parts, commissioned by the New York City Ballet in 1958. Oue must see himself as a dancer of sorts, as he led soloists from the front stands through the complex web of glissandi and bent notes that opens the slow first part.

This led to a theatrical sounding orchestral section, fitting of a Hollywood blockbuster, followed by a frenzied section for horns, then ending as it began with solo strings.

Throughout the work, what was most striking was the evenness in quality from every section, each soloist and every section blending with others, yet retaining individuality in sound and phrasing.

Kyoko Takezawa was the soloist in Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto. She played with great expressiveness and liberty in tempo, and her partnership with conductor and orchestra made the performance something extraordinary.

Directing without score, up close and almost face to face with Takezawa, it was as if Oue was determined to recast the work as a concerto for violin and conductor with orchestra, and the results were impressive. Putting aside occasional intonation issues and sometimes exaggerated tempo variations from the solo violin, Oue and Takezawa produced an exceptionally intimate reading, with orchestra and soloist perfectly in tandem.

Oue conducted the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory Orchestra in a very well regarded performance of Stravinsky's Rite Of Spring just eleven months ago in the same hall - a performance marked by the energy of youth and a certain edginess. The average age of the Tokyo Philharmonic Orchestra's musicians has reduced markedly in recent decades, but is still well above that of music conservatory students, and their polish and maturity showed throughout this performance.

Oue's energy and commitment were in clear view in the Rite Of Spring, and the orchestra once again showed the depth and strength of its players, especially clarinets, bassoons and the livewire principal timpani. Ironically, the orchestral timbre that was ideal for the Tchaikovsky concerto seemed a little polite for Stravinsky's primordial strains - music that left the audience in flabbergasted on its debut in Paris.

Always the consummate performer, Oue had earlier accompanied Takezawa on the piano for her encore, and for the orchestral encore of a Japanese folk rhapsody, he conducted the initial bars,

then spent the rest of the piece egging the audience to stand and clap along.

This brought a guaranteed a standing ovation, but one that's well deserved for this noble orchestra marking its 100th anniversary.

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