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Youth orchestras make history and music together

REVIEW/CONCERT

SYMPHONIC GIFTS/Singapore National Youth Orchestra and Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra
Esplanade Concert Hall/
Last Friday

Chang Tou Liang

This will go down in history as the first collaboration between the Singapore National Youth Orchestra and the Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra, both National Projects of Excellent now under the umbrella of the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

The respective conductors,

Leonard Tan and Quek Ling Kiong, took turns to lead and play chatty and convivial hosts for the concert.

Western instruments conducted by Tan opened with Leong Yoon Pin's Dayong Sampan Overture, not merely an arrangement of the popular Malay song, but a symphonic fantasy.

Amid the obligatory dissonances and busy counterpoint emerged that catchy tune on solo oboe, accompanied by violin glissandi. The Singapore National Youth Orchestra gave an assured account of what must be Singapore's best-known orchestral composition.

Singapore Youth Chinese Orchestra then followed, conductor-less, to perform works of two popular genres: Jiangnan Shizhu and

Chuida, representing a culture of strings with winds, and winds with percussion respectively.

Happy Times was a showpiece of huqin prowess that progressed from slow to very fast. Li Min Xiong's A Well-Matched Fight featured a raucous duel between solo drummer Lim Rei centre stage and seven of her percussionist partners against the entire band, with both groups coming out first among equals.

Guest violinist Siow Lee Chin was the glamorous soloist in Kam Kee Yong's Kuang Xiang Qu (Chinese Rhapsody) for symphony orchestra, performing its fiendish free-wheeling part with swashbuckling verve as if it were Ravel's Tzigane.

The orchestration was not parti-

cularly Chinese, veering more towards the music for biblical epics by Bloch and Rozsa, and the end result brought out the cheers.

All ears were pricked for the second half, specially orchestrated for both ensembles combined.

At this point, it could be said this was an exercise symbolic of solidarity between instrumentalists across the cultural divide, rather than something truly practicable. But only time will tell.

Eric Watson's Tapestries – Time Dances now resembled a concerto grosso, with a core group of three Chinese instruments (ruan, dizi and guzheng) and four Western instruments (violin, cello, French horn and harp) backed by the more than a 100-strong orchestra.

One outcome was that Chinese instruments stood out in the solo parts because of their penetrating timbres, while violins, violas and cellos overwhelmed the huqins when massed strings sang.

At parts, Watson's creation began to sound like those of his compatriot, Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Wang Chenwei's The Sisters' Islands took on a distinctly Nanyang slant, with its use of Indo-Malay melodies, and the symphonic poem had a particularly effective spell depicting an attack by pirates of the Singapore Straits.

One only wonders which orchestra does a blown conch shell belong to. Both pieces were led by conductor Quek.

The concert ended with Jeremiah

Li's arrangement of Kelly Tang's Symphonic Suite On A Set Of Local Tunes, helmed by conductor Tan.

This medley mixed the Malay song Chan Mali Chan with Dick Lee's Home and Bunga Sayang and NDP favourite Singapore Heartbeat with a Hollywood-like vibe.

Home was accounted by solo erhu accompanied by yangqin, which lent a tender touch, and Tang's trademark in-joke was to throw in the fanfare from The Magnificent Seven – not once but twice.

As an encore, the audiences were given permission to whip out their cellphones and wave their built-in torches to the strains of Home.

After that, they gamely rode off into the sunset.