

10/07/1997

Superb show by young talents

Flavia de Souza

EACH time one hears the Asian Youth Orchestra (AYO), one can not help but marvel at the talent of those 102 young musicians.

Chosen to play in annual auditions from 11 Asian countries, each youthful talent blossoms beautifully under the baton of their music director Sergiu Comissiona, whose sensitive conducting and years of experience is capable of drawing the best from each member of the orchestra.

Such is his closeness and sensitivity to the young people he conducts, it often took just a nod, a simple hand gesture or the lift of a finger to make the music come alive and soar, taking the listener upon a crest of sound filled with youthfulness and joie de vivre.

In a gala performance held at Kuala Lumpur's Putra World Trade Centre recently, AYO opened at a brisk pace with the Berlioz Overture op. 21 entitled Le Corsaire, the scurrying strings well in tune with each other, beautifully supported by melodious woodwinds and a rousing brass especially in the chords that flung themselves in perfect harmony, the rhythm exact and precise throughout.

The treat of the evening was the famous Elgar cello concerto in E minor with guest soloist none other than the world-acclaimed cellist Yo Yo Ma.

From the first note, he held the audience rapt and spellbound with the enchantment of his playing. The beautiful warm golden tone of his equally famous and prized cello, the 1712 Davidoff Stradivarius, mirrored the intensity and sincerity of his playing.

The intimacy he created with both the orchestra and the listener could be most especially felt and heard in the slow movements, the Lento and the Adagio of the concerto.

The dialogue was perfect between him and the orchestra with never a note out of place in all the different movements and change of tempi.

He listened to them and they, together with the conductor, followed him through every breathtaking nuance and phrase, from the eloquent main theme in the opening movement, adagio-moderato, into an exquisite, tender and appealing second movement, lento, into the statements of the third, allegro molto, each statement vibrantly played and ending with just the right amount of flourish.

The adagio before the joyous final allegro had a moment of intense passion held against a hushed orchestra like a poetic love sonnet.

Rapturously-acclaimed and curtain-called several times, Yo Yo Ma obliged with a solo encore, the unaccompanied Sarabande from the Sixth Suite by Bach.

Elgar's Enigma Variations dominated the second half of the programme. Each one of the 14 variations, a series of deliciously contrasted mood pictures, was dedicated to a personal friend of the composer and Elgar claimed that in writing them he had, "looked at the theme through the personality" of that friend.

The main theme itself had for counterpoint "a theme that is not heard" which Elgar also declared "the enigma I will not explain - its 'dark saying' must be left unguessed". Nobody has identified that mysterious unheard theme, the enigma of the Enigma.

Commissiona took the orchestra through the different moods of each of the variations and the each was well projected and defined, the questioning queries of the opening stating the enigma of the work, the

whole, showing the orchestra to its advantage and highlighting the different orchestral sections in each of the variations, for instance, the melodious woodwinds in the first variation, and in another, a delicate and tuneful oboe and clarinet against the muted strings.

An excellent timpanist and the percussion as well as a good and well-intoned brass section lent just the right colour in their entries. In the stirring finale, the rhythm and tempi changes were well defined, to end the concert with a flourish.

AYO's performance was presented by the newly set-up Malaysian Youth Foundation. The foundation, led by chairman Mirzan Mahathir, is aimed at nurturing our musically-inclined home-grown talents through exposure and appreciation of orchestral music.

The gala evening was the culmination of a three-week rehearsal camp, prior to its four-week tour of Hong Kong (performing first during the colony's historical handover to China), China, Korea and Japan.

(END)