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Bewildering blend of Bs

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A SELECT many were happy guests of property developer and hotel operator YTL at the recent opening of its Marina Bay Estates on Pangkor Laut attended by Prime Minister Datuk Sri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah. After the ceremony there was high tea, followed by a concert of celebration, and then by supper.

For the occasion, Tan Sri Francis Yeoh brought internationally acclaimed musicians, the Orchestra Internazionale d'Italia conducted by Paul Mann, Shanghai-born soprano Ying Huang, American-trained tenor Warren Mok, and Italian flautist Andrea Griminelli.

If there was any problem deciding what music to play for the more than 200 formally-dressed politicians, businessmen, and YTL staff, it was solved in the most sensible way possible. In the 18th century there would have been serenades during the meals and possibly a vocal piece d'occasion composed for the actual concert, like Gluck's *Le Cinesi* or Mozart's *Der Schauspieldirektor*.

On Pangkor Laut, two string quartets drawn from the Kuala Lumpur Symphony Orchestra performed during high tea and the preceding night's dinner, but, for the concert, lacking the services of a Gluck or Mozart, what more appropriate for an audience than to feast them on an equally lavish orchestral and vocal high tea? So, to a musical meal at Emerald Bay the guests were ferried, on the lawn beside the beach of which an enormous acoustically-wired stage had been erected.

To match the unusually varied assortment of liquor at the Marina Bay buffet, the Orchestra Internazionale d'Italia, supplemented by 22 members of the KL Symphony Orchestra, played as spirited an account of Berlioz's *Carnaval Romain* and Rossini's delightful *La scala di seta* Overtures as one could ask for. The outdoor acoustics, however, were not completely satisfactory.

Facing the violins, I had an exciting evening of string playing but, particularly in the Rossini work, missed the full delight of the woodwinds.

The remainder of the programme, performed with the soloists, singly, as a duo, finally as a trio, served up internationally popular operatic pastries, the ones everyone knows and loves, independent of their dramatic context.

The temptation here, but arguable it is the only way, given the circumstances of the Emerald Bay concert, was to present them as dim scenes, each a complete drama in itself.

So we had "Recondita Armonia" (*Tosca*), "La donna e mobile" (*Rigolette*), "O sole mio", "Cole n grato", and, one of his encores, "Nessun dorma" (*Turandot*) from Warren Mok, his highly praised lyrical-spinto tenor voice sacrificing some feeling to swell out, through a microphone, lustily, fruitily over the whole orchestra and audience.

Another encore, however, *My Way*, chosen as a gracious and humorous tribute to the Dr Mahathir and Yeoh, was entirely misconceived, quite wrongly and embarrassingly belted out as a full-blown operatic aria; for this song there is really only one singer, that late Hollywood crooner Frank Sinatra, and "his way" of singing it.

From Ying Huang, a trifle taxed by her dramatic first aria, "Che bel raggio lusinghero" (*Semiramide*) - she is, after all, unknowingly declaring her love for her own son! - came the more accommodating "O Mio babino

caro" (Gianni Schicchi) and Musetta's "Quando m'en o" (La Boheme), beautifully, silkily sung.

Together Ying Huang and Mok sang Traviata "Brindisi" and the long Act I love duet from Madama Butterfly, both in the latter, understandably, yielding fully to the temptation eschew soft tenderness for an effortless vocal conquest of the entire Emerald Bay.

Sadly, Andrea Griminelli was a victim of the less than perfect acoustics, his golden flute tone simply unable to soar clear beyond the orchestra in Rachmaninoff's Vocalise and James Horner's love theme from Titanic.

Despite these superb artistes, the real stars of the evening for me were the orchestra, their consistently whole-hearted support of the soloists with, as ultimate hero, conductor Paul Manu, leaping, bending, quivering, gesticulating, enjoying himself hugely in the great unbuttoned Italian tradition, except for one small fact, that he is English to the core. Which only goes to prove that art surmounts all national barriers.

The supper which followed was a heavy meat, fish, and wine affair. Those who wanted another concert to duplicate this more sumptuous meal could decide their own programme from a wide, intelligently chosen selection of classical CDs in the resort's library, available on loan to guests to play on the CD machines in their rooms.

It was altogether a unique if bewildering blend of (to mention only the main Bs of the evening) Bourbon, Berlioz, Butterfly, Burgundy, and Berg!

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