

THE STRAITS TIMES

Impressive debut by chamber orchestra



Singapore's first fully professional chamber orchestra, the re:Sound Chamber Orchestra, introduced itself with refined playing. PHOTO: LOH JUN YI

🕒 PUBLISHED SEP 2, 2016, 5:00 AM SGT

Singapore's newest ensemble re:Sound offered refreshing treats of classical works

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REVIEW / CONCERT

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

re:Sound Chamber Orchestra/ Jason Lai (conductor)

Victoria Concert Hall

Wednesday

Several new ensembles have appeared on the Singapore scene over the past few years. The latest, like its predecessors, sets out to do things differently.

For a start, there's the name - re:Sound Chamber Orchestra.

It is clever, in that it combines the Latin preposition, which indicates referring to something, with the English word for the noise an orchestra makes. Put together, they create another word which means resonating.

However, that annoying little colon and the odd capitalisation, intended to highlight the cleverness of the name, should be dispensed with at the earliest opportunity.

Then there is the unusual starting time for its debut concert - 8.15pm. The idea is to allow patrons to enjoy a leisurely dinner before heading off to it. But the downside of dinner before concert is that drowsiness ensues. I wonder how long re:Sound will maintain the 8.15pm start.

The biggest innovation is that this is Singapore's first fully professional chamber orchestra. Chamber music implies small, intimate, conductor-less ensembles, while orchestras are big and have a conductor.

But there are noble exceptions, notably the Mahler Chamber Orchestra which made such an impact when it visited Singapore a few years ago. As it was, not all of re:Sound's inaugural concert involved a conductor.

The unique selling point of re:Sound is its focus on classical repertory - not the random dates young music students are told define the term "classical", but the clean, direct expression of music inspired by the classical lines of ancient Greek and Roman architecture.

This new orchestra introduced itself to the world with three works by Mozart, Stravinsky and Schubert, all linked by that sense of classical purity.

Mozart's 40th Symphony has become such a mainstay of any orchestra's repertory that to hear it played with such refinement and discretion by these players, crisply and firmly guided by Jason Lai, was a refreshing treat.

Even more refreshing was an impressively neat and precise account of Stravinsky's Concerto For Strings.

Lai gave a tremendously incisive bite to its cutting rhythms, shaped its dynamics with infinite care and generously gave full rein to Stravinsky's witty gestures.

In the spirit of chamber music, re:Sound played Schubert's Fifth Symphony without a conductor, leaving it to concertmaster Seah Huan Yuh to keep the 30 or so players in line.

It was probably too soon in their collaborative existence to attempt this, and while the performance undeniably had great energy, it was often too fast (especially the second movement) to achieve the kind of pristine clarity that had characterised the first half of the programme.

On top of that, a sense of nervous tension permeated the playing and effectively obscured the essentially sunny and open-spirited character of Schubert's music.

As a debut performance, however, this was very impressive indeed. Singapore's newest orchestra is going to be a very good one.

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