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Concert review: Outstanding performance of Don Pasquale by The Arts Place



Ming-Mou Hsieh (right, in a 2018 production of La Bohème at Kaohsiung Spring Arts Festival), conveyed many facets of Pasquale's character but was also at times a stiff and rigid presence on stage. PHOTO: KAOSHIUNG SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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PUBLISHED OCT 22, 2019, 12:30 PM SGT

Review

Don Pasquale

Joshua Tan Kang Ming (conductor)

Victoria Concert Hall

Sunday (Oct 20)

Just three short years into its existence, the Arts Place and its Artistic Director, Martin Ng, have achieved something remarkable. They have presented a major opera in a performance which can only be described as outstanding.

Although this was a semi-staged, concert performance with few props, costumes or actions, so ingeniously simple was Yang Xinxin's production that it needed nothing more in the way of visual spectacle than Aaron Yap's seamless lighting.

The drawback of opera in a concert hall setting is that the orchestra is placed centre stage and, both visually and aurally, tends to dominate.

As it was, the assorted musicians brought together to form the orchestra for this production, were so impeccably prepared by Joshua Tan Kang Ming, that they very quickly blended into the production.

The orchestral playing was unfailingly self-assured and capable, and the chorus, superbly coached by Terrence Toh, brought much humour and vitality to the opera's third and final act.

Ensuring that everything went musically without a hitch, Tan proved once again his innate feel for opera and his instinctive sense of dramatic timing.

However, the bulk of Donizetti's Don Pasquale rests on the four principal soloists. A fifth, a cameo role of a fake notary, was taken in Sunday's performance by David Tao Chen Ming, who, for all the brevity of the part, invested it with real vocal and dramatic personality.

Ernesto, the lovelorn nephew, was sung by Peruvian tenor, Oscar Ruben. He sometimes seemed strained and unconvincing, but he came into his own with a deeply affecting second act aria pouring out his sorrow after being made homeless and disinherited by his uncle. His off-stage serenade in the third act was also a real delight.

Ernesto's uncle, the eponymous Don, was performed by Ming-Mou Hsieh. He certainly conveyed many facets of Pasquale's character, at his best when tearing into the sheaves of bills detailing his wife's unfettered spending. But he was also at times a stiff and rigid presence on stage, and vocally he was not always able to hold his own against the orchestra.

Alvin Tan had no such problems. He seemed utterly comfortable and at ease in the strangely ambiguous role of Malatesta, and vocally was a commanding, powerful and precise presence. His gloriously flexible articulation in Donizetti's hallmark patter-songs was one of the more memorable musical elements in this performance.

Without in any way diminishing the impact of the other singers, by far and away the most impressive - to an almost jaw-dropping extent - was Teng Xiang Ting. She played to the complex character of Norina - part nun, whore, penniless widow and selfish society butterfly - with relish, switching effortlessly from one persona to the next.

Whenever Teng was on stage, she became the focal point around which everything else revolved. Add to this a voice of stupendous strength, laser sharp focus and impeccable control, and the Arts Place may have found Singapore's first true opera star.

Correction: The photo caption has been edited for accuracy.

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