

THE STRAITS TIMES

Encore

Hand puppets in opera a nice touch

In this weekly review feature, The Straits Times chronicles the recovery of Singapore's performing arts industry – whether through digital innovation or cautious reopening – after months in the dark due to the Covid-19 pandemic



The Singapore Lyric Opera's take on Don Giovanni, which featured Daniel Fong and Joyce Lee Tung (both above), incorporated hand puppets to suggest intimate scenes. PHOTO: THE SINGAPORE LYRIC OPERA

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CONCERT

FETE MUSICALE: A MUSICAL CELEBRATION

Singapore Symphony Orchestra Esplanade Concert Hall, last Wednesday

MOZART'S DON GIOVANNI

Singapore Lyric Opera

Victoria Concert Hall, last Friday

Philandering puppets and piano stood in for the usual big-budget flourishes in the Singapore Lyric Opera's socially distanced take on Mozart's Don Giovanni.

The abridged edition of the three-hour-long opera, performed in Italian by singers from the company's Artists' Training Programme with minimal set and costuming, ran breezily for just under two hours without intermission.

While resembling an opera school production, there was much to recommend it. Gone was the orchestra, but tireless pianist Aloysius Foong stood in as an excellent substitute.

Baritone Daniel Fong sang the serial philanderer opposite baritone David Tao as his long-suffering valet Leporello. The chemistry between master and servant was totally believable, with many moments of comic relief as the duo negotiated a series of romantic escapades.

All the famous arias, duets and ensembles were included and the numbers flowed coherently under Tang Xinxin's direction. The novel use of hand puppets to suggest intimate scenes during these times of social distancing provided a nice touch.

With large-scale productions attended by big audiences no longer sustainable during the Covid-19 pandemic, this common-sense approach - where musical considerations come first - is the way to go.

In the same week, the Singapore Symphony Orchestra reconvened with larger forces than last year's small pandemic ensembles, incorporating woodwinds, brass and percussion alongside the strings.

This made for a scintillating performance of Ravel's Piano Concerto In G major, with principal guest conductor Andrew Litton leading from the piano.

In a work that headily mixed influences from Basque music, Mozart and New World jazz, he had all these disparate styles down pat with a combination of deft finger work and rocking syncopations.

Excellent solo work from orchestral musicians also contributed greatly to the success, not least David Smith's tricky trumpet blasts, Gulnara Mashurova's sweeping harp cadenza, and Elaine Yeo's plaintive cor anglais (English horn) in the sublime slow movement accompanied by Litton's fine filigree.

While Ravel was bold and brash, fellow Frenchman Debussy provided a more restrained face in his Petite Suite, orchestrated by Henri Busser.

Much of its four movements was a showcase of exemplary woodwind playing, backed by svelte strings. Only a heart of stone would reject the niceties of this Belle Epoque creation, with flowing lyrical lines in En Bateau (On A Boat) and three jaunty dance movements that followed.

This suite held up a perfect mirror to Beethoven's relatively brief Eighth Symphony, his only symphony without a slow movement. Lightness and buoyancy was the result and, under Litton's firm guiding baton, nothing sounded hectic or rushed in its four movements.

The ensemble responded with unity and immediacy. While this symphony seemed puny alongside the mighty Seventh and monumental Ninth, this lively reading made it stand tall.

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