SSO GALA

YEFIM BRONFMAN • BEETHOVEN & BARTÓK

30 November 2017
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Performing Home of the SSO

Lan Shui, conductor
Yefim Bronfman, piano
NATIONAL PIANO & VIOLIN COMPETITION 2017

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SSO GALA
YEFIM BRONFMAN •
BEETHOVEN & BARTÓK

Singapore Symphony Orchestra
Lan Shui, conductor
Yefim Bronfman, piano

GIOACHINO ROSSINI
Overture to The Thieving Magpie 9'00

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58 34'00
1. Allegro moderato
2. Andante con moto
3. Rondo: Vivace

Intermission 20'00

BÉLA BARTÓK
Piano Concerto No. 2 in G major 28'00
1. Allegro
2. Adagio – Presto – Adagio
3. Allegro molto

Concert duration: 1 hr 45 mins

Go green. Digital programme booklets are available on www.sso.org.sg.
Scan the QR code in the foyer to view a copy.
Since its founding in 1979, the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) has been Singapore’s flagship orchestra, touching lives through classical music and providing the heartbeat of the cultural scene in the cosmopolitan city-state. In addition to its subscription series concerts, the orchestra is well-loved for its outdoor and community appearances, and its significant role educating the young people of Singapore. The SSO has also earned an international reputation for its orchestral virtuosity, having garnered sterling reviews for its overseas tours and many successful recordings.

The SSO makes its performing home at the 1,800-seat state-of-the-art Esplanade Concert Hall. More intimate works and all outreach and community performances take place at the 673-seat Victoria Concert Hall, the home of the SSO.
The orchestra performs 100 concerts a year, and its versatile repertoire spans all-time favourites and orchestral masterpieces to exciting cutting-edge premieres. Bridging the musical traditions of East and West, Singaporean and Asian musicians and composers are regularly showcased in the concert season. This has been a core of the SSO's programming philosophy from the very beginning under Choo Hoey, who was Music Director from 1979 to 1996.

Since Lan Shui assumed the position of Music Director in 1997, the SSO has performed in Europe, Asia and the United States. In May 2016 the SSO was invited to perform at the Dresden Music Festival and the Prague Spring International Music Festival. This successful five-city tour of Germany and Prague also included the SSO's return to the Berlin Philharmonie after six years. In 2014 the SSO's debut at the 120th BBC Proms in London received critical acclaim in the major UK newspapers The Guardian and Telegraph. The SSO has also performed in China on multiple occasions.

Notable SSO releases under BIS include a Rachmaninov series, a “Seascapes” album, two Debussy discs “La Mer” and “Jeux”, and the first-ever cycle of Tcherepnin’s piano concertos and symphonies. The SSO has also collaborated with such great artists as Lorin Maazel, Charles Dutoit, Gennady Rozhdestvensky, Neeme Järvi, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Diana Damrau, Lang Lang, Yo-Yo Ma, Janine Jansen, Leonidas Kavakos and Gil Shaham.
Lan Shui is renowned for his abilities as an orchestral builder and for his passion in commissioning, premiering and recording new works by leading Asian composers. As Music Director of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra since 1997, American Record Review noted that Shui has “turned a good regional orchestra into a world-class ensemble that plays its heart out at every concert”. Together they have made several acclaimed tours to Europe, Asia and the United States and appeared for the first time at the BBC Proms in September 2014.

Lan Shui held the position of Chief Conductor of the Copenhagen Phil from 2007 to 2015, and from 2016 he became their Conductor Laureate. He recently concluded a four-year period as Artistic Advisor of the National Taiwan Symphony Orchestra. As a guest conductor, Shui has worked with many orchestras. In the United States he has appeared with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, and Baltimore and Detroit symphony orchestras. In Europe he has performed with Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, hr-Sinfonieorchester, Danish National Symphony Orchestra, Radio-Sinfonieorchester Stuttgart des SWR, Deutsche Radio Philharmonie, Gothenburg Symphony, Tampere Philharmonic and Orchestre National de Lille. In Asia he has conducted the Hong Kong, Malaysian and Japan Philharmonic orchestras and maintains a close relationship with the China Philharmonic and Shanghai Symphony.

Since 1998 Shui has recorded over 20 CDs for BIS – including a Rachmaninov series, a “Seascapes” disc and the first-ever complete cycle of Tcherepnin’s symphonies with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra – and also music by Arnold and Hindemith with the Malmö Symphony Orchestra, which has received two Grammy nominations.

Lan Shui is the recipient of several international awards from the Beijing Arts Festival and the New York Tcherepnin Society, the 37th Besançon Conductors’ Competition in France and Boston University (Distinguished Alumni Award) as well as the Cultural Medallion – Singapore’s highest accolade in the arts. Born in Hangzhou, China, Shui studied composition at the Shanghai Conservatory and graduated from The Beijing Central Conservatory. He continued his graduate studies at Boston University while at the same time working closely with Leonard Bernstein at the Tanglewood Music Festival. He has worked together with David Zinman as Conducting Affiliate of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, as Associate Conductor to Neeme Järvi at the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and with Kurt Masur at the New York Philharmonic and Pierre Boulez at The Cleveland Orchestra.
Internationally recognised as one of today’s most acclaimed and admired pianists, Yefim Bronfman stands among a handful of artists regularly sought by festivals, orchestras, conductors and recital series. His commanding technique, power and exceptional lyrical gifts are consistently acknowledged by the press and audiences alike.

In recognition of a relationship of more than 30 years, Bronfman joined the Israel Philharmonic conducted by Zubin Mehta for concerts during the orchestra’s US tour in the fall including Carnegie Hall, followed by concerts in Munich, London and Vienna with the Bayerischer Rundfunk Orchestra and Mariss Jansons, another frequent partnership and collaborator. In addition to returns to the orchestras of New York, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Washington, Indianapolis and Toronto, he will tour with the Vienna Philharmonic and Andrés Orozco-Estrada in a special programme celebrating his 60th birthday in the spring. In Europe he can also be heard in Berlin with the Philharmonic as well as in recital; Italy, France, Belgium, Germany and London also in recital; and on tour with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra conducted by Andris Nelsons. A tour in Asia with the London Symphony Orchestra and Gianandrea Noseda brings the season to a close in June.

He has also given numerous solo recitals in the leading halls of North America, Europe and the Far East, including acclaimed debuts at Carnegie Hall in 1989 and Avery Fisher Hall in 1993. In 1991 he gave a series of joint recitals with Isaac Stern in Russia, marking Bronfman’s first public performances there since his emigration to Israel at age 15. That same year he was awarded the prestigious Avery Fisher Prize, one of the highest honors given to American instrumentalists. In 2010 he was honoured as the recipient of the Jean Gimbel Lane prize in piano performance from Northwestern University.

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Okko Kamu, conductor
Elina Vähälä, violin

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“Hallelujah” from Messiah
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Some composers just seem to have it all – talent, precocity, wealth, fame, popularity, flair, wit and fecundity. Such a man was Rossini. Just consider: within one year, he saw the premieres of five of his operas – FIVE! – in various important Italian theaters, including La Scala. The year was 1812 and Rossini was all of 20 years old! But this was not so unusual; he often turned out three and even four operas a year, to a total of 38 (39, counting a piece of juvenilia) by the time he was not even 40 years old. Rossini was renowned on two continents by the time he was 21, and when he drew the curtains on his operatic career in 1828, he held the distinction of being the world’s most celebrated composer (Beethoven having died two years earlier).

Rossini’s rich legacy of music is found today equally on the operatic stage and in the concert hall. Although only a handful of his operas are performed with any regularity (but what regularity!), at least a dozen overtures are staples of the orchestral repertory, including The Thieving Magpie (La gazza ladra). Tribute to Rossini’s genius and popular appeal also continues on a regular basis today through the use of his music in numerous radio and television commercials, films and cartoons, probably to a degree unmatched by any other composer.

So renowned is Rossini for his vocal pyrotechnics and memorable melodies that it is all too easy to overlook his skill at orchestration. The brilliant overture that opens tonight’s concert provides an excellent example of this. The Thieving Magpie incorporates most of the hallmarks of his orchestral style – lightly tripping themes for violins, virtuosic passages for unison trombones, a theme for the woodwinds including the piccolo in its highest register, and horn quartet writing all wrapped into a sonata-allegro form without development section. Of course there are also several of those famous Rossini crescendos – the long, slow build-up of volume, number of instruments and tension, the equivalent of a musical juggernaut. Unique to this overture, however, is the maestoso marziale introduction, which opens with the unprecedented use of two snare drums stereophonically placed on opposite sides of the stage. This in itself assured the audience’s rapt attention right from the start at the opera’s premiere performance on 31 May 1817 at La Scala. If we are to believe Rossini’s biographer Stendhal, “it was one of the most glittering, the most single-minded triumphs I have ever witnessed.”
It is the nature of many concertgoers today to test the waters of new music hesitantly and carefully. Imagine then, the circumstances under which Beethoven’s Fourth Piano Concerto was given its first public performance — as one of seven(!) works all heard by the Viennese for the first time, all by the same composer, and four of them of major dimensions. This four-hour marathon concert took place on 22 December 1808 in Vienna’s Theater an der Wien. It was a freezing cold evening, which meant conditions inside the unheated hall were uncomfortable, to say the least. In addition, Beethoven’s music was generally considered to be advanced and difficult both to play and to understand. An equivalent concert today might see four hours of nothing but premieres by Stockhausen, Lutoslawski or Corigliano — a daunting prospect for most concertgoers.

Considering the cluttered context in which the Fourth Concerto was first heard, it is perhaps not so surprising that it failed to leave a vivid impression. It is music of a lyrical, intimate bent and with great subtlety of expression, especially in comparison with many of Beethoven’s previous works and to other works on that marathon concert of premieres. In fact, it was virtually forgotten until Mendelssohn revived it in 1836, nine years after the composer’s death.

There are many bold, innovative and radical touches to this concerto. The most famous and most obvious of these is the unprecedented solo introduction. Up to this time, a concerto had always opened with a long exposition for the orchestra alone (actually, there was one exception: Mozart had combined soloist and orchestra in the exposition of K.271), but here Beethoven gives the first five bars to the unaccompanied piano playing the first movement’s principal theme in a mood of quiet restraint. There is not even so much as a bold, grandiose flourish. The orchestra responds in a harmonically remote key (another surprise), and goes on to present and develop other themes. The soloist re-enters in a quasi-cadenza passage, and then joins the orchestra in a closely woven tapestry of themes, motifs and rhythmic patterns.

It is worth noting that the three-note rhythmic cell that runs like a motto through the entire movement has its direct parallel in the opening movement of the Fifth Symphony, which was composed concurrently with this concerto. An abundance of trills, arpeggios, scales and other virtuosic baggage can be found, but is so well integrated into the musical structure that one never perceives it as empty showmanship.

The slow second movement is, if anything, even more compelling and innovative than the first. In just a little over five minutes (one of the shortest slow movements of any well-known concerto) there unfolds one of the most striking musical dialogues ever written. Initially we hear two totally different musical expressions: the orchestra (strings only) in unison octaves — imperious, assertive, angry, loud, angular; and the solo piano fully harmonised — meek, quiet, legato.
Over the span of the movement the orchestra by stages relents and assumes more and more the character of the soloist. Tamed, seduced, won over, taught, assuaged and conquered are some of the terms used to give dramatic or literary interpretation to this remarkable musical phenomenon. Perhaps the most famous metaphor is the one long attributed to Franz Liszt (now credited to Adolph Bernard Marx), who saw in it Orpheus taming the wild beasts.

The rondo finale steals in quietly, without pause, bringing much-needed wit, charm and lightness after the tense, dark drama of the slow movement. Trumpets and timpani are heard for the first time in the work. Like the first movement, it is full of interesting touches, including a rhythmic motto and a sonorous solo passage for the divided viola section. A brilliantly spirited coda brings the concerto to its conclusion.
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BÉLA BARTÓK (1881-1945)

Piano Concerto No. 2 in G major

Bartók began work on the second of his three piano concertos in October of 1930 and completed it a year later. He was soloist in the first performance, which took place in Frankfurt on 23 January 1933 with Hans Rosbaud conducting the Frankfurt Radio Orchestra. The formal layout follows the “arch” structure Bartók favoured in many of his compositions. The fast, energetic outer movements share thematic material, while the second movement alone is an arch, with two slow, quiet passages framing a contrasting central Presto. Both outer sections of this movement alone are arches, with alternating passages of strings and piano. Orchestra and soloist share equally in presentation of the musical material, and in the prominence of the writing. György Kroó gives this highly descriptive evaluation of the work: “We are held by the colourful cavalcade of mood and style, the many kinds of tones and material, the variety of the pictures which succeed each other with surprising lightness and the brilliant artistry of expression and texture ...”

A rushing upward scale in the piano, a fanfare from the trumpet, and we’re off on a non-stop, riotously exuberant conversation between piano and orchestra. Much of the first movement is percussive, pounding, earthy, almost primitive in nature but always thrilling. One need not be a pianist to recognize the fiendish difficulty of the piano writing, which frequently involves extended successions of two-, three- and four-part chords for both hands played at a rapid clip. It is an endurance test as well, with the piano playing in all but 23 of the movement’s 307 bars. In the tradition of standard, 19th-century concertos, there is a cadenza near the end of the movement, after which the orchestra returns for the wild ride to the end.

Strings were silent in the first movement, so they come to the fore for the second movement. The opening passage divides the strings into seven parts, all played pianissimo, muted, and without vibrato. György Kroó describes it as “empty, glassy”. Then, as Kroó writes, “the piano attempts a dolce theme, but this scarcely emerges from the dark background and, as if frightened by the rumble of the timpani, stops immediately after the first plaintive question. Once again the cold, spectral, impenetrable sound-wall of the strings rises before us, but now it is as if even this were speaking in its own ghostly language.” Then follows the fascinating Presto section, a fantasy (Kroó calls it a “hallucination”) filled with quivering sounds of the night: twittering birds, buzzing insects, rustling foliage, grunting beasts, and mysterious rumbles.

The finale is positively barbaric in its release of primal energy. Here the full orchestra is finally used. In form it is a rondo (ABACADA), with the A passages unforgettable for their pounding timpani and syncopated piano writing. Material from the first movement is unmistakably carried over into the third. For the rush to the end, “in a jubilant, youthful tone,” writes Kroó, “the piece seems to run literally out of this world.”

Programme notes by Robert Markow
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