

Unusual but strangely good

review concert

DEATH AND THE MAIDEN

SSO Chamber Series
Victoria Concert Hall
Sunday

chang tou liang

Six weeks after its official closing gala, a definitive final concert was held at the Victoria Concert Hall. How appropriate it was for musicians of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, its long-time resident, to do the honours.

It was a most unusual, if incongruous programme, to unite Baroque master Georg Telemann, classical icon Franz Schubert and 20th-century American innovator George Crumb. Yet it worked strangely well, an indirect nod at the diverse acts that have graced the venue through the decades.

The four short movements of Telemann's Trio Sonata In D Minor served as a delightful appetiser and warm-up for three musicians who gave the Singapore premiere of Crumb's Vox Balaenae (Voice Of The Whale). Avant-garde for its era, the 1971 work carrying an eco-conscious message was an evocative and tuneful surprise.

Flautist Roberto Alvarez gave a tour de force of musical mastery and breath control. His part demanded otherworldly timbres that combined singing and whistling in addition to the traditional blowing and flutter-tonguing.

If one sought electronic or extraneous augmentations, there was none to be found other than simple amplification.

Aiding and abetting were cellist Ng Pei Sian's expert manipulation of harmonics and slithering glissandos, and Shane Thio playing the insides and keys of his prepared piano. Through its 20 minutes, the humpback whale's song was recreated by instrumental simulation and celebrated.

Even if some of the composer's directions, including musicians wearing masks and bathing the stage in blue light, were not observed, the overall effect was still magical and haunting.

The final work was Schubert's most popular string quartet, nicknamed Death And The Maiden.

The quartet of violinists Chan Yoong Han and Lim Shue Churn, with violist Gu Bing Jie and cellist Guo Hao, gave an account notable for its tautness and urgency.

The opening and third movements exhibited a sense of palpable struggle, defiant in the face of impending tragedy. Heavenly longueurs inhabited the slow movement's variations on a theme from Schubert's song of the same title, where Chan's violin pleaded with a beseeching poignancy.

Fatalistic whirling in the final tarantella, breathlessly hurtling towards the last cadence brought the evening to an emphatic close.

After the final curtain had figuratively descended and metaphorical tears had dried, music was still ringing in the ears.

Three years could not come soon enough.