

Concert of the Month

By Dr Chang Tou Liang

Elgar *Violin Concerto*
Mussorgsky-Ravel *Pictures at an Exhibition*
Orchestra of the Music Makers
Chan Tze Law, Conductor
Gabriel Ng, Violin
Esplanade Concert Hall
Friday, 17 June 2011, 7.30 pm
Tickets available from SISTIC

If you enjoy music performed by talented young people in Singapore, you could do no better than attending a concert by the Orchestra of the Music Makers (OMM). Formed just three years ago, the band of students, NSFs and young non-professional musicians have taken the

local concert scene by storm. Not only have their passion and youthful enthusiasm stirred the spirits, their quality of playing has also astounded – their 2010 performance of Mahler's Symphony No. 2, *Resurrection*, garnered a slew of superlatives from international music critics. Just listen and believe.

Dr Chang Tou Liang interviews Chan Tze Law, music director of OMM, and prodigious young violinist Gabriel Ng, who has been invited to perform the Elgar *Violin Concerto* with OMM.

Dr Chang Tou Liang: OMM is now three years of age, but it has accomplished some truly amazing performances of Rachmaninov's and Mahler's symphonies, something even professional orchestras would be proud of. What is your secret?



OMM in performance

Chan Tze Law – CTL: My secret? There isn't one! It's never about my performance. OMM performances are about feeling the music together, being touched by it, and communicating that to the audience. For me it is always their performance that really matters. I know it sounds passe, but my ethic has nurtured a mutual trust that has developed over many concerts (like 15!), where everyone explores each other's musical souls. You can see why, by the same token, they find extreme satisfaction in philanthropic work too. (OMM has to date raised over \$300,000 for various charities like the Straits Times School Pocket Money Fund and Children's Cancer Foundation.)

Dr Chang: It also looks like you are taking OMM on a tour of the world's greatest classics, especially the blockbusters. How does OMM choose its concert repertoire?

CTL: OMM polls its members for repertoire suggestions and the artistic committee then combines these into attractive and meaningful programmes. Although I reserve the right to veto, I have never had to. And you can see why!

Dr Chang: High praise comes naturally to concerts by OMM. However that's not just because the musicians are young, but because they are actually talented. How do you keep them fired and passionate about performing?

CTL: Human beings have feelings and tend to gravitate towards repeating pleasurable experiences. I see every performance as a journey we undertake to somewhere we have not been before. On stage, we explore and wonder at the exquisite musical moments while journeying together, telling our story as we live it. This spirit of discovery spurs us on to explore even further. And the reward comes not just from this musical experience, but also from the leadership and management aspects of running an orchestra, as well as the social and mentoring roles many of them take on.

Dr Chang: Mahler and Elgar have been accounted for, so what's next for your group of sonic youth?

CTL: Richard Strauss's *Don Juan*, Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring*, Mahler's Symphony No. 8 (or Symphony of a Thousand), single composer cycles and more movie music have all been mooted. Watch this space!

Dr Chang: What do you find most satisfying working with this remarkable group of youngsters?

CTL: Their sense of mission and maturity of vision. These are the most important root ingredients for any creative output.

Dr Chang: What's life like at the Yehudi Menuhin School in Surrey, England, where you are studying? Is it anything like we imagine – a musical version of Hogwarts (a school for wizards, described in the Harry Potter series of books)?

Gabriel Ng – GN: The first thing that comes to mind is the pace of life over there. Even amidst numerous activities that happen each week in school, the overall lifestyle in the sleepy town of Cobham is very relaxed. One would always have time to think about music and life, and indulge in random musings. Like Hogwarts, you are pretty much left on your own to manage your timetable, but unlike Hogwarts, there aren't any evil characters to deal with!

Dr Chang: What led you to select Sir Edward Elgar's monumental Violin Concerto as the work you will perform in concert and also record?

GN: The Elgar *Concerto* is special; it is unlike other violin concertos. The sheer length (about 45 minutes) makes it feel more like an epic musical journey than a three-movement work. Themes from earlier movements get repeated in the later ones, so it very much feels like one piece. It is also extremely personal and intimate, encapsulated in the seven minute-long cadenza. Being in England helps, as the piece exudes Englishness. The 100th anniversary of its premiere by Fritz Kreisler took place last year, and I am fortunate to be able to perform it this year. It is a massive challenge, one that would be tremendously exciting to perform and record.

Dr Chang: You're probably aware that Lord Menuhin recorded it with Elgar as a 16-year-old. You're almost the same age. Does that make you a little nervous?

GN: I really cannot compare myself to Menuhin. He was already a teenage prodigy when Elgar invited him to record this piece. It inspires me how mastery can be achieved at an early age. Being a pupil of the Menuhin School, I'd like to think that some part of Menuhin's knowledge and genius has been passed down. Also, Maestro Chan Tze Law's teacher was Hugh Bean, whose teacher was Albert Sammons, who was the first person to record this concerto!

Dr Chang: People are probably curious as to your practice regimes and habits. How many hours do you practice a day, and how do you keep yourself in tune with your spirit and your lighter side?

GN: I practise a minimum of four hours a day. It is often difficult to get your mind off violin work. Other musical activities can help sometimes, for example composing or playing the piano. It is sometimes hard to get away from music altogether because there are CDs and MP3 tracks longing to be played. Probably the best thing for me is to leave the house and take long walks in the woods, or go out with friends.

Dr Chang: Besides the violin and classical music, do you have other absorbing interests or hobbies?

GN: I like following football and playing it, although I am not very good. Like many others, I support Manchester United and I have so far been to one match at Old Trafford. I also like watching classic films and reading books. I recently enjoyed watching *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. **SMA**