

String music with a grand end

Review **Concert**

ENGLISH STRING MUSIC

Nafa Project Strings
Lee Foundation Theatre/Thursday

Chang Tou Liang

Nafa Project Strings is a string ensemble formed last year by students of the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, one that fosters excellence in string playing, preparing its members to play in orchestras and chamber outfits. This hour-long concert was a showcase of English music, from baroque to the 20th century.

Henry Purcell's Chacony In G Minor gave 14 players a chance to play on baroque bows in historically informed performance practice. Using little vibrato, the musicians created a clean sound in this set of short variations over a syncopated ground bass. Initially appearing overawed, the ensemble soon warmed up and the result was a well-disciplined account of this baroque favourite.

A larger ensemble soon gathered under the baton of conductor Lim Yau for a rare performance of Malcolm Arnold's Concerto For Two Violins Op. 77. Arnold was well known for his audience-friendly music, which included several film scores. The apparent spikiness in idiom with cellos issuing a gauntlet in a brusque theme at the outset was a ploy, as the music soon gained in lyricism.

Helming the solos were husband-and-wife violinists Itzhak Rashkovsky and Ani Schnarch, professors from London's Royal College of Music, who skilfully negotiated the thorny intertwined parts. While the first movement was urgently paced, the slow movement provided bittersweet moments to reflect.

The final work was a classic of the string repertoire, Edward Elgar's Introduction And Allegro. Here, the ensemble was joined by a quartet, formed by Nafa faculty members, violinists Kwok Hai Won and Matthias Oestringer, violist Janice Tsai and cellist Lin Juan. This arrangement is an early-20th-century relook at the baroque concerto grosso, with a small group of soloists backed by a larger body of players.

Despite the relatively dry acoustics of the hall, the strings coped well and made their mark with accurate playing. There was no hint of ponderousness in the slow introduction, which gathered pace into a typically Elgarian swagger. The soloists were cohesive, standing out in sonority yet blending in when it mattered.

The intricacies of the fugal finale proved no stumbling block as the ensemble flew on mercurial wings to its grand conclusion. If one were to marvel at the level of string playing in local groups in the present and near future, the secret lies in string projects such as these.