

Incoming SSO chief conductor wields the baton



Conductor Hans Graf. PHOTO: SINGAPORE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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Greek violinist Leonidas Kavakos' concerts with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) are invariably met with great anticipation.

Last Friday's gala was even more momentous as it was Austrian conductor Hans Graf's first with the SSO since the announcement last July that he was to become chief conductor of the orchestra.

Although his tenure begins in the middle of the year, for the palpably eager audience that attended, it seemed like the new chief conductor had already arrived.

Graf is no stranger to the musicians and regular attendees of the SSO, but the sound that he brought to Scherzo Capriccioso by Antonin Dvorak was fresh and new.

Soon after the opening notes from the horns, the attention that Graf put on instrumental balance and dynamics was noticeable. This was a classically Austrian reading of the Czech master's music and the results were a treat.

Kavakos is a violinist who consistently brings more to a performance than just great virtuosity or captivating playing.

The Violin Concerto by Erich Korngold, a pioneer of Hollywood film scores, has appeared on concert programmes increasingly often, thanks to its lyricism and lush orchestration.

Kavakos sailed through the technical aspects with characteristic coolness and he added an extra dimension to the concerto, reminding the listener that Korngold was an Austrian composer of the first order and that it was he who defined Hollywood music and not vice-versa.

The opening of the concerto often evokes scenes of an ethereal journey into a vast expanse.

Kavakos, on the other hand, conjured up images of a more thought-provoking inner journey.

Graf's conducting added to this, eschewing the sound of a lush studio mix for a late romantic orchestral timbre.

REVIEW / CONCERT

SSO GALA: KAVAKOS PLAYS KORNGOLD

Singapore Symphony Orchestra - Hans Graf (conductor), Leonidas Kavakos (violin)

Esplanade Concert Hall

Last Friday

This approach led to a particularly interesting second movement that was endearing without being overly romanticised.

The final movement was when Kavakos let his hair down to show less restrained virtuosity.

There seemed to be no limit to how far he could push the tempo, but still remain totally composed.

The strain did show on orchestra and conductor, though - they were pushed hard to keep up with the irrepressible soloist.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6, the Pathétique, followed the intermission.

Tchaikovsky has held a central position in the repertoire of the SSO for more than four decades and the numerous performances of the composer's symphonies have always brought out a house sound - wholehearted, robust tone, with more than a hint of Russian-school wind and string playing.

The mountain for Graf to climb was to bring new ideas to music that the orchestra knows intimately, and an audience that is accustomed to an SSO-style of Tchaikovsky.

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The extreme pianissimo in the opening notes of the symphony, the carefully nuanced phrasing and explosive climaxes made this performance thought-provoking and not just led by the heart.

Graf's direction of the SSO's strings and management of the layers of dynamics was superb, bringing a more Viennese sensibility to their playing.

This was a very fine performance of the Pathétique Symphony, with much to enjoy.

Upper strings and harp were in wonderful form, but there was a sense that the players were not yet fully accustomed to their new conductor - wind solos were less free-flowing than usual and the lower strings were a little reticent.

It will take many more concerts for conductor and orchestra to understand and, hopefully, grow even fonder of each other.

Even before he picks up the baton of the chief conductor of the SSO, Graf has signalled a subtle shift to more thoughtful interpretation and more controlled, less bombastic performance - welcome signs for many concertgoers.

The future of SSO sounds promising.

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