When students play with masters

RENAUD CAPUCON IN RECITAL
Yong Siew Toh Conservatory/Tuesday

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The strong relationship that exists between the national conservatory and symphony orchestra has meant that world class soloists who guest with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra also get a chance to perform chamber music with faculty members and students in a spirit of collegiate camaraderie.

This was never so apparent than in the case of French violinist Renaud Capuccon, who last performed at this venue the 10 violin sonatas of Beethoven in 2011.

This evening, the focus was on Johannes Brahms, whose chamber music is among the most sublime known to mankind. The recital opened with the First Violin Sonata In G Major (Op. 78), with pianist Bernard Lanskey (also the conservatory head) as equal partner.

One was immediately struck by the close cooperation between the two. Capuccon's sweet and even tone projected well across the hall but never overwhelmed, while Lanskey's accompanying figurations worked hand-in-glove.

This is not overtly showy music, but the virtuosity was in maintaining close to perfect balance. While an air of quiet nostalgia hung over the entire work, the degree displayed in each of the three movements was well differentiated and vividly brought out.

There was sobriety in the slow movement, but the emotional release in the finale, inspired by Brahms' song Regellid (Song Of Tears), was not one of outward joyousness, but subdued exultation.

After the interval, Capuccon was joined by faculty Zhang Manchin (viola), Ng Pei Sian (cello) and three students for the First String Sextet In B Flat Major (Op. 18).

The performance of chamber music is the perfect embodiment of democratic ideals, of people overcoming differences and working together towards a common goal. What a pleasure and privilege it must have been for young violinist Shi Xiaoxuan, violist Wang Yangzi and cellist Lee Min Jin, selected to play alongside their teachers and one of the world's great string players.

Any hint of nerves or awe was immediately dispelled as all six players resounded in one accord from first to last.

The beginning of the opening two movements saw violist Zhang as de facto leader, cueing the low strings in the mellow but powerful musical statements that defined this sprawling 40-minute work.

The intensity achieved in the second movement's well-known Theme & Variations was admirable, balanced by the staccato lightness and humour of the short Scherzo.

The final Rondo was not of the rollicking kind usually associated with Brahms, but one of fleet and flowing lyricism, with sunshine inexorably emerging through thickets of clouds.

Passion and high spirits rode the crest to its conclusion, and the vociferous applause by the sizeable audience was rewarded by a welcome reprise of the delightful Scherzo.