Li Siyuan

Double Bass Recital

Kerim Vergazov, piano

Programme

WAGNER
O du mein holder Abendstern

BOTTESINI
Double Bass Concerto No. 2

I. Allegro
II. Andante
III. Allegro

KOUSSEVITZKY
Valse Miniature Op. 1, No. 2
About The Performer

Si Yuan started learning the Double Bass at the age of 17, following his father’s recommendation. He later graduated from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), where he studied with Jacek Mirucki. Soon he was awarded a full scholarship to study Double Bass at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music under Guennadi Mouzyka. His other teachers include Wang Xu, He Xiaoyi, Eric Lee and Feng Dawei. He was also a member of the Asian Youth Orchestra in 2018 and frequently guest plays with many orchestras in Singapore.

Programme Notes

Giovanni Bottesini was an Italian virtuoso bassist who composed many works for double bass such as this concerto Op. 2 in 1845. Regarded as one of the greatest double bass virtuosi ever, Bottesini took up the bass almost as if the random hand of fate delivered him to it, the story goes that he applied to the Milan Conservatory as a Violinist, but the only available scholarships were for bassoon and double bass, within a few weeks of learning the bass he auditioned and was admitted successfully to the conservatory.

At that time, the lack of existing double bass repertoire meant Bottesini had to compose much of the solo repertoire for his recitals. Today his compositions are regarded as being challenging for double bassists, but in his time they were regarded as revolutionary, shattering expectations about the scope, sonic and technical possibilities on the double bass.

The concerto seems to be inspired heavily by Italian bel canto singing traditions, sounding in many places like a lyrical and flowing aria not unlike a talented tenor’s or baritone’s. The concerto opens with a highly romantic and lyrical movement and features an extended cadenza by Bottesini himself (presumably) that impressively spans the instrument from the lowest register to the highest harmonics well past the fingerboard. The cadenza effectively derives it’s musical ideas from the entire first movement and the resulting microcosmic effect is breath taking.

The Andante movement is a rhapsodic aria that is at once both introspective and soulful, it is a reminder that Bottesini, true to his roots, followed in the footsteps of the Italian operatic tradition when composing.

The energetic finale movement is written in the style of a polonaise and features dramatic leaps and virtuosic passages almost immediately from the onset, a small recap then leads to a coda before the movement ends in a triumphant finish.
Valse miniature Op. 1 No. 2

The famous Russian Bassist and conductor Serge Koussevitzky wrote four original short solo pieces for double bass in the 1890s. These works were frequently featured in his own recitals and represents almost half of his composition output. The Valse miniature here seems to be more Viennese than Russian in a musical sense, invoking an atmosphere not unlike a dreamy evening spent at a Berliner/Viennese pub at the turn of the century. The music features rubatos on the opening beats of each recurring “waltz” phrases, these phrases are punctuated by two distinctive sections that seem to represent the climax of an ongoing ball dance, with the tempo intentionally moving forward before the final recap where the music settles down to a mini coda which closes the piece climatically.

'O du Mein Holder Abendstern'
(The title of this aria translates to "oh, my gracious evening star." Wolfram is in love with Elizabeth, but so is Tannhauser. One evening, Wolfram has a premonition of Elizabeth's death and prays to the evening star to guide her to heaven.)

"Reunited with his true love Elisabeth after spending a year with Venus, the goddess of love, Tannhauser seeks absolution and a return to his earthly life."

The plot of the Tannhauser opera is derived from German mythology: it is set in the 13th century at a legendary medieval singing contest for minstrels known as the Sangerkrieg, the goddess Venus and her underground grotto is featured prominently and the opera tells of the story of Tannhauser himself, a legendary and obscure poet that may or may not have even existed.

This aria has been transcribed for Double Bass and poses numerous challenges peculiar to the Bass Intonation due to repeated chromatic notes, the already wide positions of the Bass increases the difficulty of semitones.

Melodic phrasing that needs to replicate a tenor's lyricism, playing the same music with the awkwardness of the double bass compared to the most natural instrument (human voice) inevitably poses a challenge.

In terms of articulation, the music has to be projecting, loud and lyrical but at the same time not too heavy so as not to obscure the singing qualities of the aria.

The "Bullfrog" of the orchestral strings family is often overlooked with regards to its singing qualities. This misconception is put to rest in a performance of this piece, where the warm, sonorous and powerful sound of the bass is brought to the fore.

Programme notes by Li Siyuan.