

# When marimba rhythms start to play

## › concert

BEHIND WOODEN BARS

Philharmonic Winds

Esplanade Concert Hall

Last Saturday

**Chang Tou Liang**

FIRST performances of new compositions are keenly anticipated affairs.

From an audience viewpoint, one might ask: Will the work be interesting or moving? For the composer, the telling question is: Will it ever be performed again?

Young composer Zechariah Goh Toh Chai should have little fear as he has written some of the most engaging music to come from a Singaporean.

The Singapore premiere of his Marimba Concerto, which he also conducted, was a good example. The slow-fast two-movement form worked well as it unfolded from contemplative to exuberant, from the soft focus of woodwinds, harp, piano and bass in a Takemitsu-like reverie to a veritable riot of sound with the entry of the brass.

The American percussionist and marimba specialist Kevin Bobo, armed with 12 mallets, never missed a beat and stole the show with a no-nonsense display of agility and nuance.

He then followed with three encores, including a stunning improvisation on the snare drum, proving that one does not need to be female, stone-deaf or make funny faces to be an instant hit on the sticks.

The rest of the Philharmonic Winds programme, conducted by John Boyd, was no less engaging. Around The World In Eighty Minutes would have been the more appropriate title as the orchestra blew its way from Liverpool, Chicago (by way of Prague), Singapore (by way of Kansas) to Tokyo.

Briton Kenneth Hesketh's Masque, a scherzo of Malcolm Arnold-like wit, opened the proceedings on a high.

Boyd's own arrangements of Czech-American Karel Husa's four pieces for piano duet (re-titled Divertimento) were a little too itchy-bitsy to be memorable but were salvaged by the closing Slovak Dance that included a tune also quoted in Janacek's Sinfonietta.

Two Sousa melodies, dressed up to the hilt by American Ira Hearshen, saw The Thunderer (beloved of military bands) transformed into a chorale and given the Mahler treatment.

Leaving arguably the best performance for the last, Toshio Mashima's Three Scenes from Japan played to the orchestra's strengths. It is a uniformly cohesive ensemble, its unwavering rhythm section dominated by daiko drums, and with idiomatic and refined solo-playing.

If there was a brief moment that summed up individual achievement in a background of overall excellence, it would go to the little blond soprano saxophonist, whose quirky little solo lit up the Pensive Scenes Of Winter. Bravo.