ISCM Concert
Filled with Intellectual Ears

“Forgetting now that non-so-distant date
When they (or folk facsimilar in state of mind) first heard with hisses – hoots – guffaws
This abstract Symphony; (they booed because Stravinsky jumped their Wagner palisade
With modes that seemed cacophonous and queer;)
Forgetting now the hullabaloo them made,
The Audience pricks an intellectual Ear.”

by Siegfried Sassoon, “Concert – Interpretation (Le Sacre du Printemps)”, 1921 (extracts)

In a diversified society like Hong Kong, audiences for classical music are no longer “facsimilar in state of mind”. Our exposure to a variety of cultural influences has nurtured an open ear to receiving what would be offered by the 2002 ISCM concert series. On 11 Nov 2002, the ISCM World Music Days launched its opening concert at the Cultural Centre with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Samuel Wong. The selection of the program, once again showing our interest in internationalism, featured works by Magnus Lindberg of Finland, Tetsuji Emura of Japan, Krzysztof Penderecki of Poland and our local composer Richard Tsang.

The concert opened with the orchestral work Fresco by Lindberg. On the first hearing of this piece, I could only partly agree with its programmatic description— that is, “a synthesis of physical drama and a sense of balance” that recalls the paintings and architectures of the Italian Renaissance. While it was obvious in its use of painting technique showing a variety of sound colours, they became so muddy at times that the sense of balance was destroyed. The textural contrasts were also obvious only in their extreme states (very thin and oppressively thick). Their developing progress was not clearly articulated and many interesting incidents in the building progress had been missed and therefore a lack of physical drama resulted. This was possibly due to the orchestra’s difficulties in rhythm counting which was vital to producing ensemble power.

A sense of cloudiness in the concert hall was then cleared up by Tsang’s Spinoff, a flute concerto characterized by the use of rhythm. Unlike Fresco’s unshaped sound colours, Tsang’s piece was full of well-articulated timbral contrasts. Tsang’s concepts of timbral contrasts seemed to be more conservative compared to the avant-garde approach of Pendereck. His choice of percussive background with progressive entries of different instruments made his compositional plot more predictable. The soloist, although flawlessly managed expressing the idea of “spin-off” with his powerful rhythmic drive, had unfortunately suffered dynamic imbalance between his delicate tone and the overwhelming sound of the tutti. His artistry was deservedly exposed again in the virtuostic cadenza.

After the intermission, the concert hall was filled with yet another type of sound – that of Les Papillons de Lorenz by Tetsuji Emura. Inspired by the scientific theory “Butterfly Effect” originated by Dr. Lorenz from M.I.T., this 12-minute work displayed elements much more than mere scientific intelligence. It was highly atmospheric, as demonstrated by the use of a wide range of dynamic level (from the perceived ppp to fff) and extreme textural contrasts (from sparse tranquility to a tornado-like heaviness). Never a moment this music failed to draw my attention - that on awaiting different kinds of timbral effects being gradually revealed.

The last item presented was Concert grosso by Penderecki, with another avant-garde approach this time not in his long-lost timbral experimentation, but in his choice of the genre – a concerto for 3 cellos. Having 3 cellists setting up side by side evoked a question “will it be possible to tell which cellist is having a turn in the recording of this music?” The question turned out to be a difficult one as visual effect became a vital part in the performance. In fact, watching at the performers enabled a better understanding of the work’s structural beauty. The entry of each soloist was marked by energetic rhythmic patterns and distinctive melodic phrases which declared their equal importance. Although structurally a neo-classical work, there was no lack of novelties: the use of solo marimba in responding to brass passages, a quartet-like section with 3 cellos and a violin and a 3-part cadenza all added to this tradition framework a new horizon. The concert was enthusiastically received and undoubtedly left an important musical landmark to Hong Kong’s music history.