



CLARENCE LEE Piano Recital Yong Siew Toh Conservatory Concert Hall Thursday (24 November 2011)

What a pleasure it is to finish a long day of work with good music, especially when it comes from a young talent who is also a passionate musician. Young pianist Clarence Lee is a final year student at the Conservatory, whose studies was disrupted by that most unavoidable of trials that comes with being a Singaporean male - 2 years of National Service (or is it National Servitude?). Thankfully his hands are intact, but more importantly that priceless inner muse that leads to instinctual music-making is gloriously preserved.

His well-conceived programme began with a tiny Scarlatti *Sonata* in F minor (K.466), that dovetailed neatly with Beethoven's *Appassionata Sonata* (Op.57), also in the same key. The former was illuminated with clarity and a rounded legato that brought out its tender bittersweet quality, contrasted with the latter's boom and bluster. The more mature musician in Lee avoided the bangy and splashy tendencies of his younger years, and went for instead for the heart of the music by projecting well and bringing volume to bear only at the right moments. Even in the coruscating finale, might and power was reserved - rightly so - for the final page. Before that, he went velocity and lightness

instead, which made for a refreshing change from those all-too-loud versions that pass for passionate hearts.



The best performance fell to Liszt's transcription of Wagner's *Isoldes Liebestod*. Always careful to maintain the seamless soprano line, Lee never forsook beauty for the pursuit of virtuosity. The build up to the shuddering climax was perfectly judged, a truly heartrending journey before the tumultuous meltdown of crashing chords, and eternal rest.

He closed with Rachmaninov's *Second Sonata* (Op.36) in the 1931 revised "economical" version, which still does not disguise the thinness of its musical material. Nevertheless, Lee embraced it with a wealth of sound, bringing to bear its inherent tragedy and clangorous bells. He went for the jugular, which entailed certain risks - missed notes and lapses - avoidable but almost inevitable at this blistering pace. Yet there were moments of true poetry, such as in the central movement that shone out from within the thickets of notes. The cadenza was not perfect but brought out with scintillating panache, and the reserves of adrenaline were unleashed for the gushing finale. Despite a certain rawness, one cannot but have praise and admiration for this guts and glory reading.

How many young Singaporeans can play like this? Not many. I look forward to hearing more of Clarence Lee, perhaps in Mozart and Schubert. With these composers, more musical qualities will be discerned.



Review by Chang Tou Liang, 24 November 2011