

# *Touching hearts with finesse and ferocity*

## **review** concert

### **PIANO CONCERTO COMPETITION FINAL**

Yong Siew Toh Conservatory/Tuesday

#### **chang tou liang**

Committed piano-fanciers will point to one annual event that is a “must attend” – the final of the Conservatory’s piano concerto competition.

The chance to experience four full-length piano concertos (accompanied by second piano) in a single sitting, performed by the brightest young talents here is not one to be easily dismissed.

As with previous years, the familiar sits happily with rarely performed numbers of the repertoire. It is not every day one gets to hear Bartok’s thorny Second Piano Concerto, and one played with such finesse and ferocity as by the American Lawrence Holmefjord-Sarabi.

These descriptions may seem paradoxical, but his incisive attack on its relentless procession of notes was awe-inspiring, the violent outer movements contrasting with the slow movement’s quiet reverence. Yet in a flash, he can transform apparent religiosity into tongues of flame, amply demonstrated in the mysterious night music segment.

Altogether different was Indonesian Budianda Tioanda’s account of Mozart’s congenial Piano Concerto No. 23, a respite for the senses. The arch simplicity of its flowing lines found a sympathetic ear in this sensitive artist, who mined poetry in its pages and conveyed the *joie de vivre* of its ebullient finale. The lilting slow movement was a particular pleasure to behold.

The American Edward MacDowell’s Second Piano Concerto may be accused of too much eclecticism, having assimilated the styles of Liszt, Grieg, Saint-Saens and Dvorak in its musings.

The only female finalist, Bina Jung from New

Zealand, had heft and power to surmount its massive chords and octaves, with nimbleness and wit to colour its scintillating passages with a plethora of shades. The seeming episodic nature of her solo part shouted for a live orchestra to accompany her, but there was never a boring second.

The sentimental favourite had to be Singapore’s own Clarence Lee in Rachmaninov’s Second Piano Concerto. From the word go, his was a big-boned account, with heart unabashedly worn on the sleeve. He went for outsized gestures, but always had a special place for its bittersweet lyricism, drawing out the melodies with much tenderness. His rapport with accompanist Matthew Mak was almost telepathic, drawing the work to a rapturous close.

While this reviewer’s vote went to Holmefjord-Sarabi and Lee, it was Jung who claimed top prize from the solitary judge, Polish-Swiss pianist Tomasz Herbut. No matter, all four pianists had it in them to touch hearts and change lives.