

THE JAKARTA POST – Concert Review – Published Saturday October 10, 2009

Website Link of this article:

<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2009/10/10/nso-explores-romantic-margins-and-center.html>

NSO explores the Romantic margins - and center

Edith Johnson , Contributor , Jakarta | Sat, 10/10/2009 1:24 PM | Lifestyle

The Nusantara Symphony Orchestra presented an evening of Romantic expression on Monday in their now standard venue at Balai Sarbini in Jakarta.

Romanticism with a contemporary cast was the theme of the evening, with the Indonesian premier of promising young pianist Aryo Wicaksono as the centerpiece.

Before the regular program commenced, the orchestra's musical director Hikotaro Yasaki spoke of the recent devastation in Sumatra, and dedicated a short memorial to the earthquake victims. The strings section gave a restrained rendition of J.S. Bach's ever-plangent Air on a G String.

The careful ensemble work set the tone for the evening. The Baroque Air on a G String, with its figurative, exploring melodic lines, charts a diatonic course above the measured harmonies that underpin it. Rhythmic surety provides a strong base for recitativo melodies. Yet the emotional whole foreshadows the lush passions of the works by Prokofiev and Tchaikovsky.

Director Yasaki chose the short work Quartettino, a landscape painting, to begin the planned program. Only the strings played, reduced forces for this contemplative, neo-Romantic work by Japanese composer Susumu Yoshida.

Although I was expecting modern harmonies and the listening challenges that 21st century works usually demand of us, Yoshida surprised me with an accessible reflection

on diatonic assumptions. Open harmonies slowly unfolded, voices called out to each other from the far corners of the orchestra.

The NSO handled the sustained monotones well. Gone was the hustle and bustle of Jakarta life outside the Balai Sarbini - Yasaki's conducting showed us we had all the time in the world between each stroke of the bow. Yoshida, with a nod to Copeland, avoided convention. Primordic fugal shapes begin only to be disrupted, leaving us with the simplest of motifs moving among the sections.

Jakarta's symphony goers got a special treat with Aryo Wicaksono's able and dynamic performance of Serge Prokofiev's Third Piano Concerto. I imagine Prokofiev, born in 1902, as a jazz musician working in the wrong country, or as a gamelan player from Bali reborn into a different locale.

He writes for the piano as a percussion instrument. Any gong kebyar performer would appreciate his unexpected shifts in rhythm and tone.

The piece requires that both hands interplay, dancing around each other; Wicaksono was true to the playful quality of Prokofiev. The slow waltz at the beginning of the second movement soon gave way to a torrent of chords from the piano supported by pulsing harmonies from the orchestra. The usually dynamic Yasaki, conducting this challenging piece with a visiting soloist, took on a different role during the concerto.

I caught up with Wicaksono at the intermission and asked what it was like to work with Yasaki. "He's wonderful to work with, so accommodating of both me and the orchestra," he said. "The Prokofiev was new to them and Yasaki worked carefully during the rehearsals, running through the difficult passages slowly to get it right. I have to say, he just doesn't let go."

Prokofiev is recognized as an accessible composer, who writes with a strong sense of tonality. Still he flexes his modernism in a quiet section in the middle movement, testing the diatonic language that his contemporaries had shed more dramatically. **Even in the slow and pensive sections, Wicaksono kept the dry percussive quality, reminding us this is not a romantic work, but a modern work about Romanticism.**

Wicaksono was not permitted to depart before giving an encore. He showed soul in his restrained and lush playing of Wagner's Liebestod, as arranged by Liszt.

The last work of the evening was a warhorse of the Romantic era, Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony in E minor. It's a major piece and a lot could be said, but I won't. Tchaikovsky is accessible and at times too obvious, but the delicate innovations lie in his orchestration.

He was a colorist, looking for sophisticated ways to interweave all the instruments rather than treat them as sections. Yasaki's work with the NSO brass and winds section showed across both sections, and the audience recognized that work with special accolades for the oboist, English horn player and French horn players.