

Concert review Red Dot Baroque sheds new light on Brandenburg Concertos with stripped-down staging



Red Dot Baroque played all six Brandenburg Concertos in a single concert. PHOTO: YONG JUNYI



Red Dot Baroque marries academic rigour with an infectious joy in performance. PHOTO: YONG JUNYI

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The Complete Brandenburg Concertos

Red Dot Baroque

Victoria Concert Hall

Sunday, 7.30pm

Johann Sebastian Bach's Brandenburg Concertos have been regularly played in Singapore over the years, but no ensemble has ever performed all six works in a single concert.

Singapore's leading period instrument ensemble, Red Dot Baroque, celebrated its fifth anniversary in 2023 by accomplishing this feat.

Dedicated to the Margrave of Brandenburg, these assorted concertos were so diverse that no same combination of instruments was repeated through its course.

Led by founder violinist Alan Choo, Red Dot Baroque's performances eschewed big orchestral sound effects heard in recordings of old, opting instead for lighter textures, thus shedding new light on the music itself.

The concertos were not played in sequence, and were instead juxtaposed to make logical sense and most enjoyable listening.

The two longest works were heard in the first half, beginning with Concerto No. 1, which had four movements and involved the most players.

Flown in specially from Europe were natural horn players Nicolas Roudier and Stefan Blonk. Together with oboists Veda Lin, Leow Rui Qing and Howard Ng, they formed a cohesive unit of soloists, giving the music a festive feel.

After a traditional fast-slow-fast three-movement form, its dance-like fourth movement was a multi-part minuet which also included an invigorating polonaise.

Unusual, too, was Concerto No. 3 for just strings and continuo, arguably the most familiar work of the half-dozen. Its second movement consisted of only one bar, a cadence ornamented by harpsichordist Mervyn Lee, before launching into that most tricky of speedy string fugues. The effect was just marvellous.

Closing the lengthier first half was Concerto No. 5, historically the "grandfather" of all keyboard concertos.

Harpsichordist Gerald Lim began as part of the ensemble, and later peeled away as his score got increasingly more soloistic and florid, culminating with an elaborate cadenza, essentially a written-out improvisation.

Its lovely central movement had just three players – Lim with Rachel Ho's traverso flute and Brenda Koh's violin as intimate partners.

The shorter second half opened with Concerto No. 2, famous for its unique combo of trumpet, recorder, oboe and violin as soloists. Its bright and celebratory music, unfortunately, revealed how difficult it was to play a trumpet without valves accurately, as soloist Danny Teong struggled for the most part.

Concerto No. 6 featured no violinists, being instead a haven for mellow low strings. Violists Placida Ho and Chen Zhangyi, with cellist Zoi Yeh, backed by viola da gamba players Leslie Tan and Mervyn Lee, ruled the roost with darker and dusky timbres that were a welcome diversion from all the high-pitched high jinks.

The jaunty gigue that closed showed that "unfashionable" instruments could also have their fun.

This revelatory concert concluded with the cheerful tones of Concerto No. 4, in effect a virtuoso violin concerto closely backed by Tan Aik Shin and Rachel Ho on recorders.

This totally suited Choo's freewheeling showmanship to a tee.

Is there a local group that marries academic rigour with an infectious joy in performance as naturally as Red Dot Baroque? Based on its five years of creative spirit and energy, no.